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DE RUEHUL #1088/01 1060417
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 160417Z APR 07
FM AMEMBASSY SEOUL
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 3882
INFO RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 2327
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 2432
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RUALSFJ/COMUSJAPAN YOKOTA AB JA
RHMFISS/COMUSKOREA J2 SEOUL KOR
RHMFISS/COMUSKOREA J5 SEOUL KOR
RHMFISS/COMUSKOREA SCJS SEOUL KOR
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHINGTON DC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC//OSD/ISA/EAP//

UNCLAS SEOUL 001088

SIPDIS

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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: ECON ETRD KS PGOV PREL

SUBJECT: GWANGJU: BIRTHPLACE OF ROK DEMOCRACY GEARS UP FOR 2007 ELECTIONS

¶11. (SBU) Gwangju's votes were pivotal in electing Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun in 1997 and 2002. Also, the May 18, 1980 student uprising and massacre in Gwangju was a defining moment in Korea's modern history and, due to misinformation that tied the U.S. to the event, a source of anti-Americanism in the region. Poloff went to Gwangju on March 30 to meet opinion leaders, students and others to find out what to expect from Gwangju voters in 2007. Gwangju, with 1.4 million inhabitants, hopes to hit above its weight this presidential election as it has in the past by providing a base of support for a progressive candidate to emerge as a legitimate competitor against the leading opposition candidates.

7080 FORUM

¶12. (SBU) The 7080 Forum, made up of leaders of the 1980 Gwangju uprising and those that had key leadership roles in the anti-dictatorship movement through the 70s and 80s, told poloff that they would once again lead a popular wave of progressive forces to victory in the December elections. Mr. Choi, one of the leaders of the group and the oldest present, said that "we will support any candidate as long as they are not Grand National Party (GNP)." The group of about 30 members meets regularly and plans a large gathering with other NGOs and activists at the end of April to kick off the campaign season. Mr. Kim, a Democratic Labor Party member, asked why the U.S. continued its imperialist ways in Iraq and North Korea at the start of the meeting, but as poloff left, Mr. Kim said he hoped to visit the U.S. and thanked poloff for listening to his concerns.

POLITICAL REPORTERS

¶13. (SBU) Five political reporters from the leading regional newspapers told poloff over lunch that Gwangju hoped to shed its anti-American image and gain recognition for something other than dissent such as culture or being the birthplace of democracy in Korea. (NOTE: Jeolla Province is the birthplace of former President Kim Dae-jung and was the center of anti-government protests during the Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan regimes. END NOTE) They explained that the lack of large-scale anti-FTA protests leading up to the agreement was due to a recognition that the economy had to change. They

agreed that Lee Myung-bak's high approval rating (up to as high as 36 percent in the Jeolla Provinces) would evaporate once a progressive candidate emerged, but had no clear idea who might emerge as the favorite in the southwest.

V-365 FORUM

¶4. (SBU) According to the leaders of Vision-365 Forum, that group's organization could be key in mobilizing voters during the primaries and the general elections throughout North and South Jeolla Provinces. Mr. Kim Kyoung-hun, the vice-president of the forum, told poloff the group had been approached by all the leading candidates -- GNP, Uri Party and even independents -- to request assistance organizing support in the region. The forum hoped to go national, but for now had representatives in every town throughout the Jeolla Provinces. The purpose of the forum is to advocate sound policies and, during elections, to provide organization and support to future-minded, progressive candidates.

POLICE VIEW

¶5. (SBU) The Jeolla Province Police Chief of Information, Mr. Kim, assured poloff over dinner that Gwangju and the Jeolla Provinces would not vote 95 percent in favor of any progressive candidate as they had in past presidential elections. The three who head up the intelligence gathering branch of the Jeolla Province police noted that Lee Myung-bak's popularity would not disappear completely if he were to become the GNP candidate and that he could expect over 10 percent of the vote in Gwangju. They attributed this less to the influence of Christianity in the Jeolla Provinces (Lee is an elder in his church) as some claim and more to a greater concern about the economy and a trend away from regionalism.

COMMENT

¶6. (SBU) There is no doubt that Gwangju and its surrounding province of Jeolla will vote overwhelmingly for a non-GNP candidate in December. The only unknown is whether this support is above or below 90 percent. Analysts believe that Gwangju's principal concerns now go beyond politics and regionalism. Poloff's visit confirmed this, especially Gwangju's preoccupation with the economy. Gwangju is still behind other regions in economic development, but many hope that continued expansion of high-speed rail lines from Seoul to the region and the World Expo in Yeosu (the southwest coastal city is in the running for the 2012 World Expo) could improve conditions for Gwangju and the region. These economic concerns, we believe, could give a boost to non-progressive candidates, especially former Seoul Mayor Lee Myung-bak.

STANTON